

Initiation by Fire

The destructive results of lightweight wood construction inspire a call for preventative changes in fire codes

By Michael McPartland,
Mayor, Edgewater



In January 2015, just 21 days into my appointment as Mayor, I was in my office conducting interviews for local boards and committees when the first alarm went off. Not knowing what was about to transpire, I continued with my interview process. A few minutes later my daughter called me and in a tone I'll never forget said, "Dad, something serious is happening across the street." Across the street from our home was the Avalon complex in Edgewater.

I halted the interviews and headed home. It didn't seem as if the complex was in danger of going entirely up in flames, there was a lot of smoke and confusion about the location of the fire. Checking in with Edgewater fire Chief Tom Jacobson—I've known Tommy my entire life—it was apparent he knew we had a major problem.

We would find out later the fire was caused by workers using a blow torch under a sink when a spark from the torch entered the space between the walls, starting the fire. But at that point we only knew that we were facing a dangerous situation.

The chief had multiple search and rescue teams inside the buildings with men risking their lives getting people out and still trying to locate the fire. The smoke grew more and more intense and after about an hour the first flames appeared. We still had teams of men inside when the chief made the call to

get his men out and attack the fire. The fight to contain and save the structure, as well as the surrounding homes, was on.

RISING FROM THE ASHES One year ago, 240 families lost their homes and all their belongings. I believe we should learn from the experience. We should accept the fact that the current fire codes in a lightweight wood construction environment are unacceptable. Common sense dictates that having a system in place which does not address the main reason why Avalon burned down is irresponsible. I'm not talking about draconian measures, either. I believe by tweaking the current NFPA 13R code we can prevent another Avalon from happening.

First, we require sprinkler heads in the spaces between walls and ceilings, those spaces allowed the fire to hide and spread throughout the entire complex. That single measure would have stopped the fire in its tracks, period!



The timing of the fire, gaining traction while residents were still at work, helped prevent serious injuries and deaths from the conflagration that consumed more than 240 homes.

Secondly, we add masonry fire walls every so many feet to compartmentalize a fire that allows firefighters a chance to locate and extinguish a potential disaster.

MADE TO CODE The Avalon Bay Edgewater complex was built out of a lightweight wood construction method. It's cheaper and easier to build and, therefore, yields a better return for the developer. One would think that by not carrying the expense of traditional building methods, the state building codes would adjust appropriately.

While saving building costs with lightweight wood construction, our fire

codes should be upgraded. The savings from the construction method could be used to offset the cost of a better fire suppression system.

Avalon Bay Edgewater was built with a National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 13R code. This 13R code requires sprinklers for low-rise buildings in rooms and hallways but not closets, many bathrooms, and unoccupied spaces between walls and ceilings. The spaces between walls and ceilings in a lightweight wood construction environment without a fire suppression system in place are a recipe for disaster.

Not only have you jeopardized the lives of the occupants of the building, but also the lives of your first responders. A sprinkler system with an adjustment of requiring sprinkler heads in those spaces would have certainly saved the Avalon complex in Edgewater from burning to the ground.

CONSTRUCTION UPGRADE REQUIRED

The Avalon fire in Edgewater is a prime example of why the use of the more extensive straight NFPA 13 code should be required in that type of construction. In addition to the NFPA 13 system, masonry fire walls every so many feet should be required to compartmentalize a fire.

Making the Difference

Many factors played a part in such a successful response to the fire.

1. Time of day.

The fire began at approximately 4:30 on a Wednesday afternoon. Most of the residents were hard-working families. Many were not home or just getting home from work when they were ordered to evacuate.

2. The quick response by our local firefighters and police.

They cleared and led the residents quickly out of the building—no easy task. That complex was as large as a city block with many hallways and floors to navigate.

3. The wind was never an impactful factor.

It was a cold, relatively calm night.



Mayor Michael McPartland and Governor Chris Christie talk about the recovery from the major fire.

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By requiring those two relatively small adjustments, first responders will be in a much better position to find and stop another destructive fire like the Avalon from happening. Using the less stringent R13 system makes no sense at all.

I believe we need to start looking at how to protect the lives of firefighters



Mayor Michael McPartland of Edgewater, County Executive Jim Tedesco, and fire chief Tom Jacobson speak to the media after the Avalon apartment building fire.

Working Together

During the Avalon fire, we had over 500 first responders from more than 35 municipalities respond to the call. I learned a lot about emergency response and how critical cooperation between agencies is during an event of that magnitude.

I'd like to mention how well everyone conducted themselves in a precise and professional manner, from Edgewater's fire Chief Tom Jacobson and all his men, to each and every fire company and emergency response team that showed up.

Although I was a newly appointed Mayor, with good people surrounding us, the Borough of Edgewater came through with flying colors. Edgewater's entire administration, councilman, and councilwomen manned the community and relief centers throughout the entire ordeal.

Our County Executive Jim Tedesco and his team of professionals stayed with us for days to ensure that every last detail was taken care of. Jim's expertise of being a former Mayor and fire chief was invaluable during those first few days.

and first responders, as well as property. The cost and adjustments are minor in comparison to the benefits of the stricter code. In addition, developers and property owners will surely benefit from more favorable insurance rates based on upgraded fire suppression systems.

Furthermore, we should encourage retrofitting existing multi-family, multi-story buildings that have the R13 system with sprinklers in the spaces between floors and ceilings.

A GOLD STANDARD Upon the one-year anniversary of the Avalon fire in Edgewater, a reporter asked me in retrospect if I would have done anything differently. Short of re-doing and upgrading the current fire code, I responded "no." I feel terrible for the residents who lost everything in the fire, but I am extremely proud of the way our town handled the situation.

Not only did the first responders do an incredible job, but the entire community came together and took care of their neighbors in need. Relief centers were mobilized almost immediately, food and supplies poured in from local businesses who wanted to help. Clothing, toiletries, utensils, you name it—the entire community came out to help their brothers and sisters.

I believe Senator Cory Booker said it best when describing the response from the community volunteers, "Edgewater has set the Gold Standard going forward on how a community should react in an emergency." 🍷

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